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Female Fantastic in Anthologies: Gendering the Genre and its Discourse

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Volume 22 Issue 4 (December 2020) Article 4

Anna Boccuti,

"Female Fantastic in Anthologies: Gendering the Genre and its Discourse"

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Abstract: In the last decades, the fantastic literature written by women has been the subject of various studies, which, from different standpoints, have tried to investigate the characteristics of the *female fantastic*. In this essay, after a critical review of the most prominent theories about the so-called *feminine fantastic* and *female writing*, I will focus on the narrative strategies of the female fantastic. Through the close reading of the anthologies *Tra due specchi. 18 racconti di scrittrici latinoamericane*, and *Insólitas. Narradoras de lo fantástico en Latinoamérica y España*, I'll try to draw a cartography of the Hispanic Fantastic short stories written by women. My goal is to verify if it is possible to identify any recurrent linguistic and rhetoric solution or if, on the contrary, the peculiarities of the female fantastic lie in its political and ideological use of fiction and in its constant subversion of literary themes, so as to undermine the patriarchal dominant discourse.

Anna BOCCUTI

Female Fantastic in Anthologies: Gendering the Genre and its Discourse"

The fantastic and gender: moving towards a re-functionalization

My goal in this essay is to explore and define forms and functions of the female fantastic. This is a theoretical object with still imprecise features, and yet it is at the center of an increasing number of editorial projects that seem to suggest a special convergence between the fantastic and women's writings.¹ I am referring, in particular, to the numerous anthologies dedicated to the female fantastic that have been published in recent decades, including *Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* (1977) edited by Anne Richter, The Virago Book anthologies, published from 1987 onwards, *What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction* (1989) edited by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, , *La Eva fantástica: de Mary Shelley a Patricia Highsmith* (2001) selected by Juan Antonio Molina Foix, *Tra due specchi: 18 racconti di scrittrici latinoamericane* (2004) by María Cecilia Graña, *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology* (2015) edited by Ann and Jeff Vandermeer, *Insólitas: Narradoras de lo fantástico en Latinoamérica y España* (2019) edited by Teresa López-Pellisa and Ricard Ruiz Garzón. The titles of these volumes display a significant semantic variation with respect to the classification of their subject that is worth highlighting. Richter opts for "feminine fantastic," suggesting an essentialist notion of women's writing. Salmonson and Vandermeer instead adopt a more overtly political label, and speak of a "feminist anthology." More neutral are the titles of Graña and López Pellisa-Ruiz Garzón, which indicate the gender of the writers in Italian and Spanish: "scrittrici" and "narradoras."

What is the relationship between fantastic and gender that these anthologies take up? On what basis may this affinity be explained? A brief review of some theoretical work may help to uncover the reasons for the convergence that we are discussing here. As Moers and Gilbert and Gubar have underscored, since its inception in the XVIII century a non-mimetic form very close to the aesthetics of the fantastic, the Gothic, provided women writers with the rich "web of metaphors" (Wallace 27) they needed to speak implicitly of their condition as "women imprisoned, and buried alive, as 'ghosts'" (Wallace 27), and as "civilly dead" (both figuratively and literally) in the father's or husband's home (Wallace 31). Of course, these theorists referred to a very restricted group of women, those belonging to the white bourgeoisie who at that time had access to the literature and used Gothic imagination as a powerful device to project their individual traumas on those of an entire epoch. The fantastic and, in general, "speculative fiction"² seem to have offered a similar possibility in more recent decades, prompting an examination of its effects on readers.

Rosemary Jackson's description of the influence of fantastic discourse on reality is helpful in this regard:

Its [speaking of the fantastic] impossibilities propose latent 'other' meanings or realities behind the possible or the known. By breaking down single, reductive 'truths', the fantastic traces a space within a society's cognitive frame. By introducing multiple, contradictory 'truths', it becomes polysemic (13).

The analogy between the fantastic and the so called *feminine* may thus consist in the opening to contradictory points of view of marginalized voices, which modifies our (socioculturally overdetermined) sense of what is possible by undermining the monological discourse of a dominant male order, and thereby tracing anew the boundaries of our world. The same function is also performed by discourses that convey a logic considered to be *other* by the dominant order, such as those of childhood or of ancestral cultures. What is at stake here is the perspective from which the notion of fantastic and fantastic alterity have been defined, a central matter in the earliest studies focused on the fantastic and gender.

¹ When using the word *women*, we mean the historically and politically complex subject which, across class and gender lines, suffered a similar condition of oppression, invisibilization and silencing by the patriarchy. This does not correspond to the notion of *woman* that results from a condensation of discourses, representations and models produced by a culture and a society shaped by the male order, as Teresa de Lauretis explains.

² As Marek Oziewicz explains, since the early 2000s, speculative fiction "was adapted as a designator for the collective field of non-mimetic literature and art": this meant a greater fluidity between genres and established a fruitful interaction with other fields, including drama, film, visual arts, music, computer games, and caused an attenuation of the war between genres for "the stamp of literariness" and for who better responded to the need of representing, through unrealistic forms, the challenges and contradictions of the contemporary era. See Oziewicz 2017.

These studies date back to the early 1970s, in conjunction with the well-known Todorovian structuralist systematization of fantastic literature and the heterogeneous theories on women's writing that opened up a lively debate in France and the United States. It is within the context of these reflections that the definition of the uncanny elaborated by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay, *Das Unheimliche*, was initially problematized. Although the fantastic and the uncanny do not overlap completely, they do coincide to some extent, especially if we understand the uncanny as a particular expression of the feeling of fear and anguish that we must also consider constitutive of fantastic literature, as theorists like David Roas have stressed (Roas 46-47). To explore the fantastic, it is thus necessary to take the uncanny into consideration. As it is well known, in his essay Freud lists the female body – the *black continent* that is object of both repulsion and attraction, horror and nostalgia – among the sparks of the uncanny, since, as he points out, the female represents "the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning" (Freud 245). The negative prefix *un* contained in the German term *unheimlich*, the etymology of which Freud dwells on at length, would be nothing more than "the token of male repression" of their being born to a woman (Freud 245).

Among the first replies to Freud's speculations are those of Hélène Cixous in her work "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* ('The Uncanny')" (1976). Cixous starts by deconstructing the logocentrism of Freudian theory by uncovering the bifurcations of its argumentation: she provocatively suggests reading Freud's essay as a piece of fiction whose strength lies in the difficulty with which Freud circumscribes his subject, and in the gaps the text leaves rather than in what it rationally asserts. The reader's disconcertment with Freud's work would thus stem from the ambiguity of its genre, caught as it is between the essayistic and the literary: "the complexity of the analysis and its suffocation goes hand-in-hand with the uncertainty of the analyst" (Cixous 526).³ This also leads Cixous to question the all-male perspective of the Freudian text, starting from the devaluation of the female character Olympia in Freud's analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale *Der Sandmann* (1817).

In fact, this analysis accounts for the fear of blindness as a fear of castration, but it omits the uncanniness of the ambiguities in the nature of Spallanzani's daughter (is she animate or inanimate?), whom Nathaniel is in love with. In his search for the definition of the uncanny, Freud also tends to identify the male anguish before a woman's body as an anguish of castration. But what Cixous points out is that Freud, just like anyone involved in the writing of fiction, would have selected some aspects of uncanniness rather than others to defend his narrative and his thesis. A woman's body as an object of fear and desire would thus have acquired an unjustified centrality in the generation of the uncanny response.⁴ Given these premises, which problematize the Freudian reading and challenge its universality from the point of view of gender, it should come as no surprise that when the *unheimlich* manifests itself in a female subject it has radically different results, reversing the typically anguished male reaction to the breach made by fantastic alterity, and more generally establishing an alternative proximity between the fantastic and the female.

Writing a number of years after Cixous, Monica Farnetti, an Italian scholar who has extensively studied the fantastic from a psychoanalytic point of view, returns – inspired by Julia Kristeva's work – to the contiguity between the feminine and the fantastic through a reinterpretation of the Freudian uncanny. According to Farnetti, the female subject displays an openness to and acceptance of fantastic elements, whatever its manifestations (monster, demon, ghost, etc.), that does not result in the annihilation of the Self but rather in a comparison that announces a metamorphosis. What would explain this disposition is a substantial difference between the male and female subject, the latter of which would be "differently characterized in every one of its passions (anxiety too, in this case, has different matrices)" ("Anxiety-free..." 50). Farnetti concludes from this that the female subject is by nature more inclined to an "empathetic" encounter ("Empatia, euforia..." 17) which, as Farnetti observes, plays out on the level of "the emotional response in which, at a textual level, the character provides to the

³ Cixous observes that in his treatment of the uncanny, Freud moves from the psychoanalytic domain, well-known to him, to the terrain of aesthetics, which though he had discussed several times was much less familiar to him. On the general elusiveness of the concept and its revisions, see Ann Masschelein's appropriately entitled essay *The Unconcept*.

⁴ In her reading of Balzac's short novel "The Girl with the Golden Eye," Shoshana Felman offers an interpretation that disarticulates and subverts the opposition between masculine and feminine, opting instead for ambivalence based on the Freudian notion of *unheimlich*. Felman points out that "Masculinity is not a substance, nor is femininity its empty complement, a *heimlich* womb. Femininity is neither a metonymy, a snug container of masculinity, nor is it a metaphor – its specular reflection. Femininity inhabits masculinity, inhabits it as otherness, as its own disruption. Femininity, in other words, is a pure difference, a signifier, and so is masculinity; as signifiers, masculinity and femininity are both defined by the way they differentially relate to other differences" (42).

disturbing event or produces before it," demonstrating "in place of the conflictual and anguished attitude with which we normally associate this paradigm, an attitude of openness, kindness, compassion, even affection and love" ("Empatia, euforia..." 17). The alterity that the uncanny embodies, therefore, would not be an irreducible difference.

The most significant aspect of Farnetti's theories concerns the effects that the uncanny has on the subject:

The experience of anxiety is repositioned [...] as an opportunity for empowerment, as a circumstance through which the female subject, finding it the most appropriate means for self-representation, in a certain sense comes to the world and gives birth to herself, producing herself a subject and identifying herself – this must be emphasized – as a strong and powerful subject for whom history, rather than coming to an end, is about to start. ("Anxiety-free..." 49)

Consequently, the uncanny has a hidden function of empowerment of the female subject, channeling an effort to affirm her identity. Since the anxiety of castration and the attraction/repulsion for the female body have been abandoned, it becomes possible – perhaps necessary – to refunctionalize the notion of the uncanny, as Chiti and Treder (5) argue, forcing a gender-based reinterpretation of fantastic *topoi* and motives and, in general, of the role of uncanny in female writing.

In fact, a substantial affinity between the fantastic and the feminine had already been theorized by the Belgian scholar Anne Richter, who compiled the anthology *Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours*, in which the introductory essay develops the ideas that would later be taken up in the book *Le fantastique féminin: Un art sauvage* (1984) and in *Les écrivains fantastiques et la métamorphose* (2017). On several occasions, Richter discusses in detail her conception of the links between the fantastic and the female, which draws inspiration from examples provided by Jungian archetypes. In particular, Richter refers to the "fantastique intérieur" (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* 6), which she identifies with the modern fantastic: women express themselves spontaneously through the fantastic characterized by the ambiguities of discourse and language, rather than by the breach of the supernatural. This presumed feminine proclivity for the mysterious and magical side of existence would not need to be explained because it is given by nature, an argument invoked repeatedly by Richter:

Les femmes pénètrent de plain pied, sans discussion et sans orgueil, dans le surnaturel dont l'existence leur semble constituer, a priori, une incontestable évidence. (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* 9)

Car la femme, qu'elle le veuille ou non, a de tout temps incarné l'aspect nocturne de l'existence, une sorte de sage inconscience plus éclairée que la conscience et surtout, plus sûre d'elle-même (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* 8).

Among the elements typical of the *Féminin*, Richter points out an intuitiveness and a propensity for effortless communion with Nature (according to the archetype of the Great Mother and the Eternal Feminine), understood as an authentic primordial dimension of being, and inevitably antithetical to Culture, which would coincide on the contrary with the realm of reason, and therefore with the Masculine (*Le fantastique féminin: An Art Sauvage* 11-19).

The Feminine, in other words, confirms itself as immanence and the Masculine as transcendence, according to the usual paradigm (see Moi) that opposes body and intellect. This argument is openly advocated by Richter in the introduction of *Les écrivains fantastiques et la métamorphose* (2017), where she cites a study that "invites us to reconnect with our bodies and our animal parts, arguing that the denial of differences between men and women has done a lot of damage in today's society" (100, translation mine)⁵. The Feminine, in short, is outlined in Richter's work as a mythical, almost mystical essence, from which a natural difference with the "Masculine" and "le privilège de penser *autrement* qu'avec la raison" (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours* 5) derive. This difference would be easily expressed in a more intimate, less mediated and more "simple" fantastic, the latter being an adjective used by Richter to distinguish the fantastic of Edith Wharton from that of Henry James, whom she nonetheless characterizes as an unsurpassed master of this genre: "le créateur le plus génial du fantastique moderne" (*Le fantastique féminin d'Ann...* 10). Accordingly, Richter proposes an essentialist and ahistorical interpretation of the "feminine," which however proves to be easily questionable and refutable for this very reason.

⁵ "nous invite à renouer avec notre corps et notre part animale, en arguant que la dénégation des différences entre les hommes et les femmes a fait beaucoup de dégâts, dans la société actuelle" (*Les écrivains* 100).

Finally, bearing in mind the etymology of the word *unheimlich*, it is possible to associate the fantastic and women's writing on another level, different from those we have considered so far. Indeed, the term *heimlich* can mean "familiar" or "domestic," but it can also refer to what is "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others" (Freud 223). *Unheimlich*, as the German negative prefix *un* announces, is therefore not only the breach of the unfamiliar into the domestic, but also everything "that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 225), or that which was to be removed (or forbidden?) but was instead expressed. In this sense, since it has been subject to centuries of marginalization, invisibility and repression, as Joanna Russ effectively illustrates in her *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), female writing *tout court* could be considered – *latu senso* – a bearer of an uncanny significance that puts the masculine and patriarchal system of discourse in crisis by virtue of its very existence.

As a mode based on the transgression of the values of dominant discourses, the fantastic in particular only enhances the intrinsically uncanny nature of the female word and, as Cynthia Duncan points out ("An eye for an I..." 234), accentuates its value as "reverse discourse" in the sense coined by Foucault. Indeed, due to its ambiguous and elliptical discourse and its allegorical meaning, the fantastic is especially congenial to the expression of what has been traditionally silenced within the male and patriarchal system, such as the vast and heterogeneous sphere connected to women's sexual desires and fantasies, in all their variety. As Rosemary Jackson convincingly argues, the fantastic gives voice to everything that has been excluded from culture (Jackson 65-72), such as the complexity of the feminine universe in its multiple variations, which fantastic literature discloses and embodies, making the structures of the dominant cultural order tremble.

On the pitfalls of a definition

In the light of all this, it seems to me that the strategies and narrative resources adopted by some women writers, in particular in the field of non-mimetic literature, could be closely related to Fantastic literature as a genre of subversion, as Jackson puts it in her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. But at what level of the text would these marks of women's writing be manifested in the fantastic? At the semantic level, that is, in the content of history in the themes and motifs? At the syntactic level and the linguistic level, in other words, in the organization of the contents of history and its discursive expression? This means accepting the existence of a female discourse... but is there something akin to a female language? These issues have been extensively studied since the 1970s. Here, for reasons of space, and as they are generally very well known, I will only summarize the main studies in a systematic way.

Some of the most relevant contributions to the debate on female writing undoubtedly come from post-structuralist theories. Cixous' then pioneering essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" ([1975] 1976) stands out in particular. This text belongs to the philosophical orientation of what is widely known as feminism *de la différence*, which was characterized by its tenacious opposition to logocentrism, i.e., the desire for a centre of all meaning, which in Jacques Derrida's view is a distinctive mark of Western philosophy. The very notion of *écriture féminine*, as Toril Moi recalls, is in fact inadequate according to Cixous, as it relies on and consolidates the classical vision of the sexual opposition between man and woman (Moi 106). Cixous aspired, on the contrary, to leave behind this binary: in fact, on her view, female texts reject the authority of a single and unique truth and abandon themselves to the pleasure of a more open writing. Women would thus be by nature be more inclined to "bisexuality,"⁶ which is understood here as the abolition of the aforementioned binary sexual framework.

Moreover, Cixous argues that female writing is closely linked to the life-giving experience of Eros, to desire deeply rooted in the body, and more generally to the writer's experiential dimension of *jouissance*, rather than to intellectual or rational constructs. As she suggestively explains:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including that one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence" [...] More body, more writing. ("The Laugh of Medusa" 886).

⁶ "Bisexuality: that is, each one's location in self (*repérage en soi*) of the presence – is variously manifest and insistent depending on each person, male or female – of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this 'self-permission', multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all the parts of my body and the other body" (*The Laugh of Medusa* 884).

The point is that such "feminine" writing cannot be exposed in rigidly theoretical formulations because these would inevitably end up reproducing phallus-logocentric masculine logic. But Cixous actually sketches out a theory that is revealed to be full of contradictions when closely examined, as Toril Moi rightly points out. Despite her aim to subvert the essentialism that is the basis of the binary conception of gender, Cixous falls fully within it. Thus, her work cannot help us identify and systematize a theory of women's writing that can also be applied to the field in question. Yet we can still see the significantly close relationship, highlighted by the French scholar, between the female and the return of the bodily and experiential dimensions, which several fantastic stories also insist on.⁷

In those very years, American feminism, which is traditionally related to the political imperatives of the emancipation movements and to the historical condition of oppression suffered by women and women writers in particular, suggested a change of approach and paradigm: from an essentialist philosophy of difference to a more clearly political dimension for reading texts written by women. It is important to point out that in these studies the reflections on the peculiarity of "feminine" writing are always openly feminist. The analysis of the political dimension of women, now understood as a collective subject defined by its material condition of oppression in the patriarchal order, allows Elaine Showalter ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 1981), founder of gynocriticism, to show that the peculiarity of "feminine" writing does not depend on biological or psychological characteristics and is not to be found in a language or style that is "feminine" or "female" by nature. Rather, it comes from the historical condition of silencing experienced by women in patriarchal society: women have not had full access to all the resources of language and writing but, as Showalter recalls when citing Erwin Ardener, they constitute "a *-muted group*, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group" (199). In fact, Showalter notes that women have been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution (193) and that "the holes in discourse, the blanks and gaps and silences, are not the space where female consciousness reveals itself but the blinds of a *prison-house language*" (193).

According to Showalter, there is no linguistic theory of women, although there is a "wild zone," invisible to male control, in which the liberation of the female voice occurs through a series of measures that break the logical-rational linearity of male discourse, such as playing with inconsistencies, space-time reversals, splits, repetitions of events and silences of discourse (those "holes in discourse, euphemism, gaps" that we have mentioned previously), which most often mask the repressed desires. Following Showalter's line, other proposals such as Susan Lanser's question the validity of the tools that literary theorists such as Gerard Genette or Tzvetan Todorov had provided in those years (or shortly before) in their readings of texts written by other men. The absence of women writers from the corpus that they took as the object of study moves Lanser (and Showalter) to propose a revision of the narratology in feminist key. Thus, Lanser outlines a theory of feminist narratology that considers three fundamental aspects: "the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory, the status of mimesis or semiosis, and the importance of context for determining meaning in narrative" (343).

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In fact, Lanser takes an in-depth look at two discursive elements that are central to the constitution of narratives by women: on the one hand the construction of the narrating voice, and on the other the point of view, namely, the person who speaks and the person who sees in the text. Indeed, these textual

⁷ This theme is not exclusive to fantastic literature, since mimetic literature also often deals with the narration of women's representation of the world based on bodily experience (in particular in autobiographical and autofictional literature). But in fantastic literature, the female body is the origin of a number of thematically varied resignifications connected with monstrosity in an emancipatory key, as I will later point out. On the relation between women's bodies and monstrosity, see Braidotti.

places give rise to the system of values and beliefs that the work proposes to the reader, and for this reason, reflections on the narrator and on the focusing assume a central role in feminist criticism. Lanser shows how a female narrator is historically considered less reliable than a male one, since only male narrators are considered objective and regarded to be the holders of universal values. The reader is therefore implicitly led to believe in a male narrator and to embrace his belief system.

These observations are particularly useful in the analysis of fantastic texts, since even in the constitution of fantastic discourse the status of the narrator and the reliability of the point of view are central, as Jackson briefly but effectively explains: "The fantastic problematizes vision (is it possible to trust the seeing eyes?) and language (is it possible to trust the recording, speaking 'I?') (18). And if a feminine eye and a feminine 'I', traditionally untrustworthy, is to be the guarantor of the rise of fantastic elements in otherwise ordinary contexts, how inclined are we to believe her? For some women writers, then, the fantastic is precisely a tool for denouncing inequalities in the reception of the female discourse and opinions.

What all these scholars emphasize, then, is that there is neither an exclusively "feminine" or female style nor an exclusively "feminine" or female language, and what is usually called "women's writing" is the product of a certain condition of silencing and oppression within the patriarchal system, which determines the vision of the world (or in other words, the point of view), the access to language and therefore the expression of women. But this does not mean that all women adopt strategies of resistance and denunciation of this condition of silencing and oppression in their texts, so that we can identify common traits within women's writings. This is what our anthologies also demonstrate, requiring us to redefine our initial object for study.

For a cartography of the Hispanic female fantastic

My initial intention was to analyze the narrative and enunciative strategies, themes and motifs recurring in a larger group of anthologies dedicated to the fantastic written by women. But transnational anthologies that include authors from different linguistic and cultural fields offer only texts that are translated from a wide range of languages.⁸ This makes them unsuitable for a reflection on linguistic and discursive material such as the one I intend to address here. Furthermore, in order to carry out a more precise textual analysis, I limit myself to those anthologies whose texts are available in the original language and which I can read and analyze without any risk of uncertainty. For this reason, I have decided to focus on an analysis of two anthologies of fantastic literature within the Hispanic and Latin-American context, with texts originally written in Spanish: a volume edited by María Cecilia Graña, *Tra due specchi: 18 racconti di scrittrici latinoamericane*, and *Insólitas: Narradoras de lo fantástico en Latinoamérica y España*, edited by Teresa López-Pellisa and Ricard Ruiz Garzón. These anthologies offer not only a state of the art but also an account of the main features of their particular subject. Moreover, they are compiled by serious and prepared scholars, who excellently perform the function of critic and "super-reader," which, according to Claudio Guillén, is an essential mark of a good anthologist:

The anthologist is not a mere reflector of the past, but someone who expresses or puts into practice an idea of what is literary, fixing genres, arousing models, affecting the reader's sense of the present, and, above all, directing the reader's eye to the future. In that case we find that the anthologist is also simultaneously a critic and a super-reader: a critic that characterizes and defines what is given, a super-reader that arranges and redispenses the given, making contemporary systems real, giving an impulse to what will be. The option then is to be or not to be an anthologist, that is, an "I" who ceases to be a private person and aspires to be "we" (Guillén 328).

The first thing that these anthologies achieve is that they "arrange [...] the given" and give "impulse to what will be," which consists therefore in showing and visibilizing the vitality and continuity of the literary production of female fantastic authors in the Hispanic world throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. When reflecting on the presence of women writers in the canon of fantastic literature, it is very useful to consider a recent essay by Patricia García, who studied 110 anthologies

⁸ For example, in Anne Richter's anthology, *Le fantastique féminin d'Ann Radcliffe à nos jours*, we find the French translation of texts of originally published in Swedish (by Selma Lageröf), in German (by Anna Seghers), in Romanian (by Nina Cassian), among others. In Antonio Molina Foix's anthology, *La Eva fantástica*, texts are translated into Spanish mostly from English and French, while in Ann and Jeff Vandermeer's *Sisters of the Revolution*, we are offered a wide selection of texts originally written in English, of which only a few have been translated from French ("The sleep of plants," "Un sommeil de plante," 1967, by Anne Richter) and Spanish ("The perfect married woman," "La perfecta casada," 1983, by Angélica Gorodischer). Besides, most of the short stories collected in this book, as I explained before, cannot be classified as fantastic texts.

published between 1946 and 2016 (16 per cent in English, 30 per cent in French and 54 per cent in Spanish). García points out that "the global proportion is very similar: 87% of indexed male versus 13% of female authors on average across the three languages" (García 584).⁹ If we consider, for example, one of the anthologies that helped to shape the Fantastic canon within the Hispanic area, the *Antología de la Literatura Fantástica* (1940) edited by Adolfo Bioy Casares, Jorge Luis Borges and Silvina Ocampo, we see that only five of the 66 authors who were anthologized in the second edition of the volume, published in 1965, were women¹⁰. So, it is hardly surprising that the fantastic is still marked by an exclusively male imagination.

A second reason for focusing on the selection of Graña and López-Pellisa and Ruiz Garzón for my analysis is that *Tra due specchi* and *Insólitas* reflect, in my opinion, two different phases of the female fantastic production and two different moments in the critical-theoretical reflection on this literature. The first volume includes fantastic short stories written by women born in the first half of the 20th century and published between 1959 and 2002. The selection is made on a notion of "feminine" that underscores the specific characteristics of the fantastic written by women – its "difference" –, many particular modulations of which are on display in the volume itself. Graña insists on the 'natural' convergence on the irrational, the emotional, the intuitive. For her, the "novelty" (9) of the "feminine" fantastic consists in this peaceful coexistence with the unknown and in the acceptance of "a heterogeneity of the world" that is returned in its totality, that is, in the co-presence of all the elements "articulated *in preasentia* as if one were trying to rescue an experiential sphere in which intuition has priority because one feels bound to the deep root of being" (Graña, *Tra due specchi* 10, translation mine).¹¹ The selection is therefore guided by a largely essentialist conception of the feminine, which is also reflected in the predilection for certain themes that are considered typical (biologically) of women.

The starting point of *Insólitas*,¹² edited by López-Pellisa and Ruiz Garzón is radically different. It contains a wider range of non-mimetic texts (science fiction and fantasy, in the manner of another anthology, *Sisters of the Revolution*), written by women born in the second half of the 20th century¹³ and mostly published from the year 2000 onwards. The volume offers, for the most part, a photograph of ultra-contemporary non-mimetic fiction and the coordinates for moving around in a constantly expanding body of work. The essentialist reading of the "feminine" that identifies as characteristic of the female fantastic those themes belonging to the semantic constellation *madness-nature-woman* – in antithesis to the constellation *reason-culture-man* – is here openly rejected, since the organization in dichotomous categories that grounds it is the result of male humanist, androcentric and anthropocentric knowledge (López-Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 115, Kindle ed.). In line with the feminist philosophical theories of the late 1990s, which understand gender as a performance and a socially constructed category (Butler), inviting a situated reading of phenomena (Haraway), *Insólitas* problematizes the very notion of "the masculine" and "the feminine," "concepts built on practices of exclusion and discrimination that the twenty-first century is still challenging" (López-Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 119, Kindle ed., translation mine).¹⁴ Therefore, no thematic or discursive peculiarities are suggested for the "insólito femenino" ["feminine unusual"], while one is invited to think of an "insólito feminista" ["feminist unusual"], manifestly vindictive, but not necessarily related to the gender of those who practice it.

⁹ She argues that it is undoubtedly possible to find a genealogy of fantastic women writers, but the statistical analysis of the data proves that it is not possible to speak of a real canon because the representation of women writers in the anthologies analysed is minimal; it is therefore also impossible to find reference models for the female fantastic (García 591).

¹⁰ They are the French author Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969), Elena Garro (1916-1998) from Mexico, Britain's May Sinclair (1863-1946), the Argentineans Silvina Ocampo (1903-1993), Delia Ingenieros (1915-1997), together with Borges, and Pilar de Lusarreta (1914-1967), together with Arturo Cancela (1892-1957). The first edition of 1940 also included the Chilean writer María Luisa Bombal (1910-1980), who was later removed from the selection.

¹¹ In Italian: "novità," "un'eterogeneità del mondo," "articolati *in preasentia* come se si cercasse di riscattare un ambito esperienziale nel quale l'intuizione ha la priorità perché la si sente vincolata con la radice profonda dell'essere" (Graña, *Tra due specchi* 10)

¹² The label "insólito ficcional" ("unusual fictions") refers to a macro-category, used in the Hispanic context to describe the production of non-mimetic literature in which different degrees of infringement of reality can be found, from the unusual, the weird, the strange (but possible) to the fantastic (impossible). See Campra, Boccuti "Modulaciones de lo insólito...."

¹³ Except for five relevant names: the Argentineans Angélica Gorodischer (1928) and Luisa Valenzuela (1938), the Mexican Amparo Dávila (1928), the Spanish Cristina Fernández Cubas (1945) and the Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi (1941).

¹⁴ In Spanish: "conceptos contruidos a partir de prácticas de exclusión y discriminación que el siglo XXI no deja de cuestionar" (López-Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón, 119, Kindle ed.)

So, at what level is it possible (if at all) to find points of contact between these two anthologies? The formal choices, themes and motifs are quite heterogeneous, although there are some elements of concordance. By way of example, we can consider Graña's anthology, which actually presents a greater thematic coherence, announced in the title with an image of a mirror as a threshold and supported by a conception of the female psychoanalytic matrix, as Graña explains in the introduction. The insistence on the experiential sphere we mentioned before explains why in this volume we find many stories focused on themes related to emotional and corporal experience that have traditionally (but not for this reason rightly) been considered the province of women: pregnancy and motherhood (Guadalupe Dueñas, "Tutti i sabati"; Pía Barros, "Artemide"¹⁵), eros and adultery ("Incontro" by Rosalba Campa¹⁶), incestuous impulses (Marvel Moreno, "Oriane, zia Oriane"¹⁷). Themes that Todorov referred to as "the you-themes" (that is, themes that are more or less directly related to sexuality or the expression of sexual desire) are also particularly common. Equally frequent is the re-signification of *topoi*, themes and motifs of the fantastic tradition re-oriented through gender, thus establishing clear architextual relations with the male canon, which is constantly involved. In these stories, the prevailing setting is the domestic space, which is transformed into an evil space according to the model of the Gothic castle (see Amparo Dávila's stories). The theme of the double is frequent and there are also other doubling figures such as dolls (Rosario Ferré, "La bambola," Silvina Ocampo, "La bambola minore"¹⁸) or mirrors (Amparo Dávila, "Lo specchio," Aída Bahr, "Sognare," María Elena Llana, "In famiglia"¹⁹) that are turned into magical objects of empowerment / epiphany / destruction. Even a classic theme such as metamorphosis (see Luisa Valenzuela, "Pantera oculare," Elena Garro, "Il giorno che fummo cani"²⁰) can be read in a feminist key, since metamorphosis allows the female body to escape or override the male norms and trigger a process of rebellion or liberation from the body.

Of course, each story presents multiple themes and motives, so there is still room for improvement within this classification.

Among the stories where, as noted by Farnetti, we witness a female subject accept the monstrous without anguish, "Oriane, tía Oriane" by Marvel Moreno and "La muñeca menor" by Silvina Ocampo stand out. In the former, the ghost is the object of the woman's desire; in the latter, the protagonist, orphaned and dispossessed, acquires a definite identity (shaped by her being feared by everyone else) when it becomes clear that she possesses a magical gift: divination. From this moment of epiphany, the protagonist becomes part of the ranks of the "witches" (which is her nickname in the family).

It is not as simple to come up with a similar systematization within the anthology *Insólitas*, since as the editors explain, the short stories it includes "belong to different fields of the non-mimetic" (López Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 72, Kindle ed., translation mine). The greater variance among genres may explain the lesser degree of thematic cohesion, which is also the result of a precise conceptual choice made by the editors: to record what women in their multiple subjectivity actually write. The anthologists state this clearly in the prologue:

What is certain is that the place from which each author writes (and from which we read them) responds to questions of identity and life experience that have to do with nationality, geographical location, gender, race, training, language or sexual inclination, and on some occasions this identity is reflected in the texts. But this does not have to happen, since creators do not have to talk about their gender or their sexuality in the works they write, especially when we are talking about fiction and not autobiography. (López Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 171-172, Kindle ed., translation mine)²¹

In the same way, as the anthologists stress, women writers do not necessarily enact strategies of "feminist fantastic" (López Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 121, Kindle ed.), although it should be pointed out that most of the stories collected in *Insólitas* adopt a subversion of the fantastic to narrate the wide spectrum

¹⁵ In Spanish: "Todos los sábados," "Artémide."

¹⁶ In Spanish: "Encuentro."

¹⁷ In Spanish: "Oriane, tía Oriane."

¹⁸ In Spanish: "La muñeca," "La muñeca menor."

¹⁹ In Spanish: "El espejo," "Soñar," "En familia."

²⁰ In Spanish: "El día en que fuimos perros."

²¹ In Spanish: "Lo cierto es que el lugar desde el que escribe cada autor o cada autora (y desde el que los leemos) responde a cuestiones identitarias y de experiencia de vida que tienen que ver con la nacionalidad, la localización geográfica, el género, la raza, la formación, la lengua o la inclinación sexual, y en algunas ocasiones esa identidad se ve reflejada en los textos. Pero esto no tiene por qué suceder, ya que los creadores no tienen por qué hablar de su género o su sexualidad en las obras que escriben, y más cuando hablamos de ficción y no de autobiografías." (López-Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón 171-172, Kindle ed.)

of experiences of a female subject in a patriarchal society, explicitly denouncing the persistence of gender stereotypes and discriminatory and sexist practices. We will look at how this criticism is implemented in the texts later.

Finding traces of female authorship in the formal elements of the texts is more complicated. To do so, we must investigate particular and/or recurrent uses of those narrative strategies that cause the fantastic effect, as listed by Rodríguez Hernández: the intra-homodiegetic narration, the interpretative ambiguity and parabasis at the level of the narrative instance; the particular temporality of the enunciation, the regressive dissolution, the absence of causality and purpose, the use of *mise en abyme* and the metaphorical metalepsis at the syntactic and organizational level of the contents; shifts from the figurative to the literal, the connoted adjective, the narrative levelling of natural and supernatural, the ellipses, etc. at a verbal level. At least the first two levels described by Rodríguez Hernández coincide with those that even the feminist unnatural narratology identifies as the places of the text from which the ideological pressure emerges and affirms itself: the "discourse level," i.e. "focalization and narration" and "the story level," i.e. "plot events within the storyworld" (Peel 82). So, it is at these levels that some possible characteristics of the female fantastic might be found.

The manipulations of the narrative instance and of the enunciation are indeed the main object of reflection of those critics who have dedicated themselves to the analysis of the discursive level (as Peel intends it: narration and focusing). Following on from Lanser, Cynthia Duncan notes how narrators such as Ocampo and Garro (both of whom are included in Graña's anthology) "employ a number of narrative strategies that lead us to question the authority normally attributed to the first-person male narrator and the omniscient narrative voice which speaks from the perspective of a male" ("An eye for 'I'..." 235). This is the case, for example, in "La casa de azúcar" (*La furia y otros cuentos*, 1959) by Ocampo. In this story, the identification of the reader with the narrator's voice, a male character, is strongly encouraged and favoured via the unique focus maintained throughout the story. The female character's voice and point of view are actually omitted. The unique focus creates complicity and closeness between the narrator and the reader, which functions to cast the female character as the Other. But as the story develops, the reliability of the male narrator is gradually eroded (until it is revealed as completely misleading) for a precise purpose that is well explained by Duncan: "It sets up a situation which will later be subverted in the text, thereby undermining the symbolic order of our patriarchal society, which automatically attributes certain positive characteristics (authority, knowledge, sound judgement) to the male voice" (Duncan, "Double or nothing?" 65).

Duncan offers similar reflections in her reading of *La última niebla* (1934) by María Luisa Bombal. She explains how the degree of reality of an experience varies depending on who is narrating the experience: "the Real is an arbitrary category, whose meaning can shift and slide according to who is telling the story and how much power or authority that person is assumed to have" (Duncan, "Reading power..." 305).²² Duncan then dwells on Bombal's language, since she believes that the work of the Chilean writer "conveys a particular 'feminine' kind of experience to the reader" ("Reading power..." 304) and pursues "an attempt to find an appropriate feminine discourse" ("Reading power..." 304). However, the description of this "feminine" language is reduced to pointing out Bombal's preference of a generic "poetic language" influenced by surrealism, from which the indeterminacy of the story and therefore the decisive ambiguity of the ending derives. This ambiguity, as we have already said, is also influenced by the play of voices and of their authority, fixed by the narrative instance. Vanessa San Román Erburu, for her part, lists some of these strategies in Ocampo's fiction in more precise terms:

Among the strategies, call them subversive, of these texts are the lack of closed endings, the rupture with what is considered a logical point of view and the uncanny tension of the narrative voices. These upheavals act as springs for the creation of a space of the feminine 'I' and provoke by themselves a rupture with the known hegemonic discourse. (171, translation mine)²³

²² In the analysis of Bombal's work, the reminiscence-confession of the narrator and protagonist of the extra-marital encounter with a stranger during a solitary walk in the middle of the night is contrasted with that of her husband, who denies it, asserting that the encounter never took place. The man thus not only denies the authority and legitimacy of female desire, but also deprives her of her right to express herself with her own voice.

²³ "Entre las estrategias, digamos subversivas, de estos textos destacan la falta de finales cerrados, la ruptura con lo que se considera un punto de vista lógico y la perturbación y tensión de las voces narrativas. Estos levantamientos ejercen de resortes para la creación de un espacio del "yo" femenino y provocan por sí mismos una ruptura con el discurso hegemónico conocido." (San Román Erburu 171).

Meanwhile, still discussing Ocampo and particularly with regard to "Autobiografía de Irene," María Cecilia Graña asserts that the disconcertment in the reader is aroused by "the ambiguity of the enunciation (...) and by the effects of *mise en abyme*" ("Le due facce di una medaglia..." 283, translation mine). Even if the studies quoted above are very detailed and effective in their interpretation of Ocampo's and Bombal's texts, I believe that the strategies identified so far cannot be used to identify the peculiarity of female fantastic discourse. On the contrary, a second look at texts authored by men shows that these strategies are common to all fantastic fiction, regardless of the writer's biological gender. For example, and limiting ourselves to two classical authors of the Hispanic canon, the lack of logical relations of cause and effect is common in Felisberto Hernández's narrative,²⁴ and the absence of closed endings is a typical solution in many of Julio Cortázar's stories. Lastly, the reader's identification with events recounted through first-person narration and with an internal focus is a classic resource of the fantastic, as are the distorting spatiotemporal effects caused by manipulations of the enunciation.²⁵

The fantastic and Gender: from text and context

It is not on the discursive and immanent level, therefore, that the distinctive trait of the female fantastic can be found, but in the way in which the elements of discourse are charged with meaning in their relationship with the extratextual elements, inherent in the subjectivity of the writer, the system of values evoked and the context of production. The considerations of Rita Felski corroborate this position and seem useful to me in terms of specifying not so much a property of female writing, but a possible function for the fantastic writing of women:

It is impossible to speak of "masculine" and "feminine" in any meaningful sense in the formal analysis of texts; the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effect in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context and not by attempting to deduce an abstract literary theory of "masculine" and "feminine," "subversive" and "reactionary" forms in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception. (Felski 2)

Other studies on the fantastic written by women (or which include a section dedicated to this subject) such as those of Jesús Rodero (2006), Danielle Hipkins (2007), Gloria Alpini (2009), Akrabova (2014) only deal in a more sideways manner with the specific analysis of the fantastic discourse, referring to a more general notion of "transgression" - of social customs associated with gender through metaphorical or allegorical discourses (Rodero), of textual boundaries fixed by the male fantastic tradition (Hipkins) - in order to overturn the male and patriarchal textual models, and then redefine the collective imagination.

In this regard, Gloria Alpini's study is particularly significant, and she identifies "a poetic of perversity" (43) that is also based on a transgression/reversal of models in order to deconstruct the female identity as a characteristic of the fantastic:

The Female Fantastic involves a 'poetic of perversity', that does not celebrate but rather rejects and 'perverts'/distorts/misrepresents/changes the traditional representation of women as something perfect/abstract/idealized. [...] The Female Fantastic paradoxically fills in the lack of a discourse by woman on herself as a real creature. [...] By deconstructing female identity, women writers develop a female consciousness increasingly able to produce 'uno spazio bianco' after 'new imaginative resources combat old ones.' ("From female Archetypes..." 43-44)

I believe that this reversal of the model is actually what allows us to draw together the anthologies under examination, notwithstanding their aforementioned differences. The reversal is also affected by the main feature that the stories collected in the volumes share: the presence of the intra-homo-diegetic narrator (in 21 out of 34 stories²⁶). As Alpini asserts, woman is no silent creature, so the choice of a personal narrative performs a basic function, common to the mimetic and non-mimetic narratives of female writers, which we could simply summarize as giving voice to the other half of the world, thus subverting the presumed universality of the male point of view and experience. This is what happens, for example, in most of the stories in our anthologies: the women represented in fact do not accept the traditionally predefined roles of wife and mother, submissive and subordinate; on the contrary, they

²⁴ See Lespada.

²⁵ See Debenedetti or Casas.

²⁶ There are 46 anthologized stories in total, but I do not consider those that are not really fantastic. 17 of the 34 stories have a female intra-homo-diegetic narrator.

finally offer their own versions of these roles. As Alpini observes, perverting and distorting the traditional representations of women the female narrator "*transforms* the Fantastic from an *alienating* mode of representation of women into a *liberating* one" because "to invest an archetype or stereotype with multiple identity to replace male fantasy with the fantasy of a female narrator." (40).

In fantastic narration, however, the first intra-homodiegetic person performs another primary function: it allows the creation of a narration that is markedly subjective and therefore inevitably ambiguous. The narrator loses distance from and objectivity toward the events of the story he is telling. From this irresolvable uncertainty comes, in many cases, the fantastic effect that makes reality crack. More interesting still, perhaps, is the fact that personal narration often implies a particular "engaging narrator,"²⁷ that is, a narrator whose aim is to establish a special complicity with the reader, who is called to share the system of values implied in the text. This is particularly evident in those texts written by women and which, to quote Akrabova's words, present speech that has a double voice and in which two opposite and/or complementary codes coexist (121), as occurs with ironic discourse.

The personal ironic narrator, then, introduces new margins of ambiguity with respect to the ideological level of what is narrated and its subversive intention, which can be recognized only by a cooperative reader.²⁸ This is the case with stories such as "Pantera ocular" ("Pantera ocular") by Luisa Valenzuela²⁹ in the anthology *Tra due specchi*; in *Insólitas*, where we can find ironic and humoristic intention in "Sin reclamo" by Cecilia Eudave," "Pequeñas mujercitas" by Solange Rodríguez Pappe, "Balneario" by Pilar Pedraza, "Una mujer notable" by Angélica Gorodischer, "El ángel caído" by Cristina Peri Rossi and in "Línea 40" by Patricia Esteban Erlés³⁰ (here we technically have an omniscient narrator but, by virtue of the internal focus on the protagonist, which becomes our eye on the world, we could say with Cortázar that it is a "first person in disguise").

So, is there a special relation between the fantastic and irony in relation to gender? Surely, the ironic intention allows us to reconnect with what Felski and Lanser said about a feminist reading of the texts, in other words, a situated reading which considers intratextual elements in relation to extratextual ones. In these stories, in fact, there is no (or not only) intratextual irony, i.e., irony directed towards linguistic or formal aspects. What instead occurs is extratextual irony, relative to the value system of the ironist: the type of complicity that must be established between ironic author and ironic reader concerns reality in the first place.

Returning therefore to our initial topic, that is, the presence of discursive strategies peculiar to the female fantastic, it is not possible to identify any, since there is not a something that we can define as "feminine language" or female discourse without falling into essentialism or reducing women to a unified, homogeneous, subject. Nevertheless, the anthologies I have examined display a marked use of irony. This "trope *in absentia*," as Kerbrat defines it (114), is situated between the textual and the extra-textual dimensions. It requires collaboration and agreement on the values necessary for the construction of meaning and the activation of the real significance of the text, obliging the reader to further reflect on these values and the meaning of their subversion through the fantastic event. If one of the main functions of the fantastic written by women may be found in its reversal and subversion of the traditional models of femininity produced by the patriarchal order, there is no doubt that irony – allowing a further destabilization of reality – can be considered an effective tool for rethinking and re-shaping androcentric values, models and discourses from a female-situated and feminist perspective. As the texts I have considered for our analysis is limited to Hispanic and Latin American literature, we cannot draw general conclusions on this point. But we can certainly stress some significant features of this literature, which can be presented as starting point for future in-depth studies in other literatures.

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²⁷ Here I am quoting a definition by Robyn Warhol, though my use of the "engaging narrator" does not coincide exactly with hers.

²⁸ On irony, humor and the fantastic, see Boccuti, "Humor and the Fantastic," and Roas.

²⁹ On the use of irony and fantastic in Luisa Valenzuela, see Graña 2002.

³⁰ Although not directly related to gender issues, we find ironic intention in "Magía indiana" by Angela Martínez (Graña, *Tra due specchi...*), and "Vida de perros" by Ana María Shua (López-Pellisa, Ruiz Garzón).

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